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Information

U.S.S.R.

Scientific/Political

Medicine and Health in the Soviet Union

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V. Reactions of the population to the medical control system

1. In consequence of the conditions already outlined, the Health Ministry has developed a strict system of control. All persons old enough to work, that is from school leaving age to 55 in the case of women and 60 in the case of men, are medically examined once a year. The official reason given out for this is that the Soviet State is doing all it can to protect the health of the population, and does not wait until people are ill. In actual fact however, the object is to place the people in medical categories, so that both men and women can be directed to the work for which they are most suitable physically. The fittest are put into category 1, which means they have to do the heaviest work and achieve the highest norms. Persons who are not so strong but are nevertheless fit for work are placed in category 2. The ardent desire of all Soviet citizens is to be graded unfit for work, and the greatest efforts, ranging from bribery of the doctors to self-inflicted wounds or mutilation, are made by would-be invalids. That the prisoners, particularly the political prisoners are given a very critical examination is understandable. There are always at least two doctors on each examination panel, as well as the leading political personality for the district. The doctors have to append their signatures to each categorization document, and supervise each other when this is being done. There are very often differences of opinion between the doctors and the political member of the panel, but the doctors try to abide by any decision they make. The actual medical worth of the examinations can be gathered from the fact that the panel is able to deal with 300 to 500 persons a day. Naked men and women appear together before the panel, are allowed to air their real or imagined complaints, and are examined and categorized at the rate of one person every two or three minutes.

2. Because of the mistrust one Soviet citizen has for another, and the mistrust each subordinate has for his superior and each superior for his subordinate, one medical panel checks the work of another, and all are in turn controlled from above. Even the high ranking officers in the health service are regularly controlled by a group of better trained doctors from either Moscow or Leningrad. Because the

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natural control system of a democratic State is missing, all controls are vertical, and just as the head of the health service is supervised, so he in turn exercises control over all under him, right down to the lowest level. Here again however, ways have been found to evade trouble. The intention of a controlling group to visit an area is usually passed to the area beforehand on the underground net, and by the time the group arrives, everything is in order. Entries in the histories of many sick cases are forged, borderline bed cases whose presence in the hospitals could easily give rise to trouble are hidden away, and members of the group are softened up with good meals and a plentiful supply of vodka.

3. About two years ago, and very probably as the result of the pressure of foreign opinion on the slave worker system, a plan was launched which had as its aim the medical examination of all prisoners for the purpose of weeding out and freeing all who were genuinely too ill for detention. A strange list scientifically diagnosing cases which could be recommended for release was drawn up and issued by the Health Ministry. As soon as the news got around, doctors were besieged by prisoners who feigned illness. Most doctors did their best to give correct diagnoses according to their instructions, but prisoners increased their efforts, either by simulating illness or inflicting wounds on themselves. After the examinations, proformas had to be filled in, but although there was a large number of genuine sick cases, nothing happened. Eventually a commission of better trained doctors was sent down and proceeded to reject about 90% of the recommendations made by the local doctors. Some of these rejections were justified, but the net result was that to all intents and purposes all the recommendations were invalid. Nevertheless a short time later MSS representatives and a Court arrived, the latter to formally pronounce the prisoners free. All cases acceptable to the Court were screened by MSS, which again rejected a large percentage on the grounds that they could not be allowed to return to their homes. What was left of the sick prisoners who could be released were therefore sent to the Kolhosp~~s~~ in Siberia, to end their days in conditions rather worse than they suffered in the camps. Only the few who had proved themselves good communists over a number of years were sent home.

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